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In the fall of 1967, Robert Smithson published the article "Ultramoderne" in Arts Magazine, in which he celebrated the beauty of 1930s New York architecture. At a moment when the (re)discovery of Art Deco was beginning, the artist used this architecture to extoll, counter to any nostalgia, a hieratic and crystalline aesthetic in which time seemed to stand still. Smithson thus pointed out the numerous stylistic references to ancient civilizations (from Egypt to India and Pre-Columbian America) that embellished these buildings by giving them a timeless aspect.[1] At the same time, he praised the "overuse of the mirror,"[2] which according to him dissolved the apparent solidity of the buildings, making them lose any appearance of reality. This eclecticism and this play with illusion constituted for Smithson a precious counterweight to the hegemony of the International Style and its dogma of transparency and rationality. Inspired by the Ultraist movement, of which Jorge Luis Borges, an influential figure for Smithson, was a prominent member, the artist christened this architecture of artifice "Ultramoderne," thereby suggesting an even greater radicalism than that promoted by modernism. Indeed, according to Smithson, while the modernist avant-garde was

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[1]   Robert Smithson, "Ultramoderne," *Arts Magazine* 42:1, September-October 1967. Reprinted in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Jack Flam (ed.), University of California Press, 1996, 63.

[2]   Smithson, "Ultramoderne," *op. cit*., 64.

tarnished by a kind of planned obsolescence,[3] the ahistoricism of the Ultramoderne went hand in hand with a paradoxical futurism in which the old and the new mirrored one another, "the 1930's reflect[ing] the 2030's into a multifaceted domain of chambers that progresses backwards in threes."[4]

Smithson, who died in 1973, was not given the chance to verify the soundness of this last assertion. On the other hand, the work of Valérie Belin, which appeared on the artistic scene at the beginning of the 2000s, might be said to offer possible illustrations of it. This is true for instance of the recent "Super Models" series (2015), consisting of quasi life-size colour photographs of fiberglass mannequins, whose naked bodies, cropped at the knee, appear superimposed on backgrounds of abstract shapes. These backgrounds eclectically recall both the cool beauty of Tamara de Lempicka's paintings and Vasily Kandinsky's Bauhaus period, while the superimposition of images is a nod to Francis Picabia's "Transparencies" (1927-1931). Yet there is nothing "retro" about these pictures. To produce the backgrounds, Belin appropriated abstract vector patterns found "ready-made" on the Internet, which she then reworked on a computer. The result evokes an anachronic future such as one finds in science fiction—a kind of Ultramoderne honed by the digital.

To the best of my knowledge, Belin has never made reference to "Ultramoderne," or more generally to Smithson's work or writings. Yet added to the fact that she has mentioned, on a number of occasions, the impact that 1960s American art had on her during her training, there are several links to be made between the two artists. For instance, the circular 1930s mirror illustrating "Ultramoderne" with its Baroque-inspired design bears more than a passing resemblance to the Venetian mirrors photographed by Belin in 1997 (series "Venice II"). As it is, the association between the mirror and photography seems to be an important connection between Belin's world and that of her predecessor. There is thus a strange echo–or shall we say, reflection? – between Smithson's Borgesian assertion that "there is something abominable about cameras, because they possess the power to invent many worlds,"[5] and Belin's evocation of the "power of infinite duplication" at the core of the photographic process, which she seeks to present in some of her series by way of a "mise en

3   Robert Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," *Arts Magazine* 41:1, November 1966. Reprinted in Flam, *Robert Smithson*, *op. cit.*, 37.

4   Flam, *Robert Smithson*, *op. cit.*, 65.

5   Smithson, "Art Through the Camera's Eye," unpublished manuscript, c. 1971, in Flam, *Robert Smithson, op. cit.* 371. Smithson here is probably paraphrasing a passage from Borges's short story, "Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius," which states that "mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and disseminate that universe." J.L. Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. James E. Irby, New Directions, 1964, 4.

abyme."[6] Last but not least, both artists share a fascination with cinema, the art of illusion par excellence.

In order to better grasp the artifice characteristic of the Ultramoderne, Smithson draws a parallel between the mirror and cinema: "the thirties are built on ideas that could only have originated in the illusory depths of the Mirrors of Mirrors. And as everybody knows, the mirror is a symbol of illusion, as immaterial as a projected film."[7] Similarly, Belin willingly confesses her admiration for the formal beauty and the "derealizing effect" of films from the golden age of black and white cinema.[8] One could certainly detect traces of this cinematographic source in a number of the artist's photographic series, yet it is in her most recent work that its echoes are the most explicit. The series "Bob" (2012) is a perfect example. In these large size images, Belin presents the full-length portrait of "a voluptuous strip teaser inspired by American pin-ups from the 1930s."[9] Using superimposition, the artist mixes photographs of the naked young woman (the "Bob" of the title) that were produced in the studio, with shots taken at a New York company specializing in film sets, whose products (furniture and accessories) are grouped thematically, thus creating different sorts of mini film atmospheres. Shot in colour, the images were digitally converted into black and white with added solarization effects. The result is an unreal sort of materiality. Certain parts of the pictures, especially those including the backdrop in front of which Bob posed for her portraits, have a grainy, sequined texture. Other parts, mostly in the bottom of the image, appear on the contrary light and transparent, producing the impression that the ground is giving way beneath the model's feet. The series is predominantly dark, but with a sort of radiance reminiscent of both the silver salts that gave old films their particular grain, and the silver paint used to coat the screen in the early days of cinema—hence, the quasi fantastic expression, "the silver screen." Both in its form and in its content, the series is thus shaped by the illusionism and magic associated with the glory days of film's history.

Yet here too, as in the "Super Models" series, Belin's pictures stay far clear of any nostalgic desire for a return to the past. This is due in great part to the artist's use of digital technology. Up until 2006, the artist's work, which was at the time exclusively in black and white, was guided by the indexical definition of photography, of which it seemed to offer one of the most perfect embodiments. In her very early work, Belin thus endeavoured to photograph light directly in the hopes of producing pure luminous imprints. This aspiration is at the heart of a number of her major early series, whether they

[6] See the interview with Roxana Marcoci in the present volume.

[7] Smithson, "Ultramoderne", *op. cit*., 63-64.

[8] Interview with the artist, Paris, January 19, 2015.

[9] Artist's statement.

represent silverware, crystal, or the previously mentioned mirrors, ("Crystal I", 1993; "Crystal II", 1994; "Silver," 1994; "Venice I" and "Venice II", 1997), or whether they show bodybuilders covered in metallic make-up (series "Bodybuilders I" and "Bodybuilders II", 1999). The first group of mannequins (2003) refers to a conception of the photographic process understood as a moulding of reality. Similarly, the pictures of Michael Jackson lookalikes (2003) underscore the logic of replication inherent to the photographic medium. Like the headshots of young black women, taken shortly before (2001), but in an opposite manner, these portraits of young men imitating the looks of an African-American known to have been obsessed with lightening his skin perhaps contain as well a reference to the positive/negative couple of photography addressed here through the topic of complexion.[10]

It is in fact with the introduction of colour in her work that Belin shifted her practice to digital photography. The turning point came with two series of headshots, "Models II" and "Black Women II." The first depicts naked models (girls and boys), Adams and Eves of a new sort who are perfect illustrations of the commercial canons of contemporary beauty. The second series shows young black or métisse "fashion victims" spotted by the photographer in the street on account of their stunning outfits, a mix of sophistication and vulgarity. Interestingly, the two groups make a kind of diptych based on symmetrical oppositions (Black / White, naked /clothed), like an extended echo of the binary structure of film photography. Yet it is with this work that reflections begin to displace the imprint as the paradigm for Belin's approach, in the sense that digital technology allowed her to give fully way to her taste for artifice. The artist does not hesitate to speak of this moment as a kind of liberation.[11] Since then she has come to play her new instruments with increasing virtuosity. Initially, she used digital technology mainly as a means to heighten the ambiguity between the animate and the inanimate, the natural and the artificial, by smoothing out the image (eliminating, for example, imperfections on a model's skin, or applying colour like a "cosmetic," as noted by Quentin Bajac quoting Roland Barthes).[12] However, Belin soon engaged in more complex procedures, such as the solarization or superimposition effects mentioned previously, thus making a clean break with realism.

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[10] Even if this topic is beyond the scope of this essay, it would be interesting to reflect on how Belin, through a profoundly formalist approach (in the best sense of the word), explores racial stereotypes and, in so doing, adds a political dimension to her work.

[11] Interview with the artist, Paris, January 19, 2015.

[12] Quentin Bajac, "Plastic Photography," trans. John Lee, in *Correspondances — Valérie Belin / Édouard Manet*, Musée d'Orsay and Argol Editions, 2008, 23. The Barthes quotation is culled from his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.

The resulting works are compositions of cold and sophisticated beauty, digital palimpsests that are like updated and visual equivalents of the fixed allegories Gérard Genette described in his study of baroque poetry. As in a prefiguration of the hybridizations of women and flowers in Belin's series "Black Eyed Susan" and "Black Eyed Susan II" (2010 and 2013), the critic explained the difference between this baroque poetics and that of the Renaissance in the following way: "We of course still find Ronsard's roses on the cheeks of every Phyllis or Amaryllis, but they have now completely lost their scent [...]. These graceful flowers with no sap, that no corruption threatens [...], they are not flowers, barely even colours: they are Emblems that attract and repel each other, but without penetrating one another, like the pieces in a ritual game, or the figures in an Allegory."[13] Allegory is a word that might also be applied to the series "Bob," its compositions teeming with details jostling around an oversized feminine figure endowed with the power of an archetype. The enigmatic still lifes that Belin produced in 2014 are similarly allegorical. As for the palette of her computer-processed images, ranging from candy colours to metallic black and whites (whether solarized or not), it recalls the "primarily mineral and more specifically lapidary system" whose effects were imitated by the flowers of baroque poetry according to Genette.[14]

But superimposition and solarization are also photographic techniques associated with the historic avant-garde movements, who used them precisely in their explorations of the qualities specific to the medium. In taking them up, the artist, after having parted ways with an ontological approach to photography, seems perhaps to have given in to the facile graces of pastiche. However, rather than speaking of mimicry or easy seduction, we might consider that the artist thereby introduces a dissonance or a new form of distanciation in her work; one that is akin to the "flavour, as perverse as one would like," detected by Genette in his analysis of "literature in the second degree," and the "relational reading" which it entails.[15] In one of his famously cryptic assertions, Marshall McLuhan affirmed that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium."[16] Overturning the usual view of a subordination of the medium to the message, the media theorist meant by this that there is no content that independently pre-exists its mediation. But as Alexander Nagel reminds us, this

[13] Gérard Genette, Figures [i], "L'or tombe sous le fer," Le Seuil, 1966, 31 (our translation).

[14] *Ibid*.

[15] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Le Seuil, 1982, 556.

[16] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Routledge, 1964, 8.

assertion is also based on the observation that each new medium inevitably revisits the one preceding it, not to rehash the past, but due to the internal logic of the evolution of media.[17]

Nonetheless, it is hard to dismiss the obvious links between Belin's more recent images and, not just surrealist photography, but surrealism itself. This connection was already visible in her earlier work in the recurring motif of the mannequin, a figure that André Breton cast as the emblem of the "marvellous modern."[18] But it seems to have become even stronger with Belin's complex digital manipulations.

The powerful onirism that emanates from her latest pictures seems to exemplify the surrealist program of achieving a "future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory."[19] It hardly comes as a surprise then to find out that her "Super Models" were inspired by a scene from the film Dreams That Money Can Buy (1947), a collective surrealist project orchestrated by Hans Richter. More importantly, the photographer acknowledges the Freudian notion of "the uncanny" as a decisive source of inspiration, just as it was for the surrealists. In Belin's work, the simultaneously strange and familiar "Unheimliche" is the basis for a conception of photography understood as a mirror whose reflection is oddly unrecognizable.[20] Yet despite all that she seems to share with the surrealists, the artist denies any affiliation with surrealism. It is true that she does not provide an explanation for this.[21] Although this may seem somewhat paradoxical considering her interest in Freud, perhaps she rejects the comparison for the same reasons as those alluded to by Smithson, who declared in "Ultramoderne": "It would be grossly wrong to consider the Ultramoderne in terms of Surrealism or existential psychoanalysis."[22] The American artist was thereby reacting to a distorted, even caricatural understanding of surrealism and Freudianism attached to the popular reception of Abstract Expressionism. It is no doubt these same "surrealistico-psychoanalytic" commonplaces that Belin wants to distance herself from.

It is perhaps worth recalling in this context that psychoanalysis is literally a study of the soul. Yet in his analysis of the contemporaneous birth of cinema and modern theories of the unconscious,

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[17] Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time*, Thames & Hudson, 2012, 166.

[18] André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, University of Michigan Press, 1969, 15.

[19] *Ibid.*, 14.

[20] Artist's statement.

[21] Belin, "Disturbing Familiarity," interview with Roxana Marcoci, 98 in the present volume.

[22] Smithson, "Ultramoderne," *op. cit.*, 65.

Friedrich Kittler asserts that film killed the soul.[23] As questionable as some of the theories of the German media theorist may be, they shine an interesting light on the question of the uncanny that can to a certain extent clarify Belin's approach. Kittler detaches the Unheimliche from its roman-tic roots and redefines it in technological terms. The core of this approach is the idea that chronophotography,—itself followed by the emergence of cinema—was made possible by the transition from psychology to psychophysics in the middle of the nineteenth century; in other words, by the abandonment of interiority in favour of a definition of the soul as a neurophysiological device, whose movements can be cut up and measured.[24] Thus, with Kittler, the motif of the doppelgänger or double, which is at the centre of the Freudian definition of the uncanny, is recast as the primary subject of cinema obtained once the mechanization of the soul completed.[25] The reference here is no longer E.T.A. Hoffmann,[26] as it was with Freud, but the numerous ghostly doubles that haunt early cinema, from Stellan Rye's The Student of Prague (1913) to Paul Wegener's The Golem (1920) or Robert Wiene's The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920).[27] The character of Cesare in this last work especially embodies the osmosis between film and the technological conditioning of the psyche. Kittler compares the jerky gestures of this somnambulist, who commits crimes while under hypnosis, to the staccato movements of the hysterics captured on film by the psychiatrist Hans Hennes in the 1900s. Hennes himself was following the example of Albert Londe's chronophotographs, which, according to Kittler, had already showed hysteria as the advance product of the film medium.[28] A similar somnambulism can be found in several series by Belin, for instance in her first portraits of mannequins or her pictures of métisses whose gaze appears at once fixed and lost in space. This impression is emphasized in the mannequin series by the misty atmosphere created by the white backdrop that, in certain images, blurs the contours of the figures. In the portraits of the métisses, it is on the contrary the bright light that gives the photographs a hallucinatory quality. The flower women of the series "Black Eyed Susan" are also somnambulists, as is the Lido dancer with her frozen smile, who seems to accept with a blissful unconsciousness all the costume changes the photographer puts her through.

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[23] F. A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford University Press, 1999 [1986], p. 158.

[24] *Ibid.*, 119-120 and 130.

[25] *Ibid.*, 156

[26] *Ibid.*, 152

[27] *Ibid.*, 155

[28] *Ibid.*, 143-145 and 148-149.

Yet the history of cinema also includes other types of somnambulists, which do not seem to fit Kittler's theories quite so nicely. Among the filmmakers cited by Belin is Carl Theodor Dreyer, whom she admires for the formal perfection of his aesthetic.[29] Dreyer created not only the cinematic archetype of the living dead in his Vampyr (1932), but also, with the character of Johannes in Ordet (1954), the figure of a somnambulist, who, it might be said, suffers not from a deficit, but rather from an excess of soul. Ever since he was struck by madness after a religious crisis, Johannes has been going on through life "somnambulistically" imitating Christ, and does so until the film's final scene, one of the most daring and moving in the history of cinema, in which, after having suddenly recovered his wits, he accomplishes a genuine miracle: the divine word contained in his prayer brings his brother's wife, who had died in childbirth, back to life. This scene is all the more striking in that it also reflexively refers to cinema's power of animation. Making due allowance for very different concerns (the French photographer's work is not religious in any way), it is possible to see in Belin's approach a desire to animate photography, in the fullest sense of "to breathe life into." Thus in describing the backgrounds used for the "Super Models," whose animation contrasts with the inertness of the mannequins, the artist does not hesitate to use the term "spiritual," meaning by this that these same backgrounds contribute to "humanizing" the inanimate subjects.[30] While it is true that the photographer's work throws back a perfect image of stillness and emptiness, it is important to remember at the same time that it has been inhabited from the beginning by a desire to "transform emptiness into plenitude, nothingness into presence, to breathe life into places where there [is] none."[31]

Belin adopts a variety of strategies to achieve this effect. One of these, which does not seem to have attracted much attention from commentators until now, but which is no less important for all that, is humour, not excluding jokes. A good example of this is the series of portraits of Michael Jackson lookalikes with their make-up and hairpieces, whose grotesqueness is accentuated by the thick, almost oily texture of the blacks, obtained by dodging, and by the dirty greys that shade the faces caked with white cosmetics. The faces of these clones are not so different from the clown masks that Belin photographed in 2004, clowns who also make an appearance in the series "Bob." In a comparable way, the opulent beauty of the fruit baskets shot in 2007 hovers between kitsch and splendour. The plastic fruits and vegetables in the latter series beckon in turn to the cheap objects that Belin used for her 2014 still lifes. Banners bearing the words "on sale" appear here and there in

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[29] Interview with the artist, Paris, January 19, 2015.

[30] Telephone interview with the artist, March 8, 2015.

[31] Artist's statement.

these compositions, deflating their poetry while little garden gnomes, crouching amid the bric-à-brac, add a decidedly ludicrous touch. This same humour may be detected in the photographs of young women in white wedding gowns holding bouquets, romantic icons par excellence, whose image is superimposed onto storefronts for sex-shops (series "Brides," 2012). If this juxtaposition can seem facile, one must nevertheless not misjudge the artist's intentions. It is not a matter of simplistically dragging an ideal through the mud, nor conversely of exalting vulgarity. What is at stake here is a questioning of clichés.

For such, indeed, is Belin's key concern: even more than giving life to the inanimate, what truly motivates the artist's work is the desire to combat clichés by undermining them from the inside. Not that Belin is driven by a quest for authenticity. In his study of underground American cinema of the 1960s, the film critic Parker Tyler–also known as an important figure in the transfer of surrealism to the United States–wrote that "Illusion is what really happens."[32] According to the art historian Ann Reynolds, Tyler's statement is particularly well illustrated by Jack Smith's performance in the pseudo-documentary Blonde Cobra by Ken Jacobs (1963), in which we see the actor, director and master of camp literally live out clichés by mimicking the stereotypical behaviour of stars from the Hollywood dream factory, such as Marlene Dietrich, or his personal muse, Maria Montez.[33] In a similar way, Belin exalts the power of the cliché, intensifying it in order to more fully bring forth its reality. Just as the Ultramoderne went beyond modernism, so her images are clichés that transcend the cliché: they are meta-clichés.

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[32] Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History*, expanded edition, Da Capo Press, 1995[1969], 69. Quoted in Ann Reynolds, "A History of Failure," in Marc Siegel, ed., *Criticism*, Jack Smith special issue, 56:2, Spring 2014, 203.

[33] *Ibid.*